



Cut-Above Cutting Boards

5 tips guaranteed to make last-minute gifts look anything but cheesy.

By Joe Hurst-Wajszczuk

Cutting boards and trays are some of the most appreciated and easiest last-minute gifts a woodworker can make. Simply saw, sand, apply finish, add a bow, and you're out the door. The gift-giving season offers a perfect opportunity to make the most of your stash of special offcuts.

Wood plays the starring role, but a few tips, plus a little inspiration can be a huge help—especially when time is tight. Here are a few of my favorite tricks for making the most of wood that might be waiting for you in your scrap bin, and some finished examples to make your own.

Because no two scrap bins are alike, this story isn't a step-by-step. My goal is to help you set up your shop with a few helpful tools and materials, and then jump-start your imagination so that you can transform your scraps and store-bought strips into unique and practical works of art.



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Any cutting board deserves a good finish. Visit our website for a free article on food-safe finishes. Just click on the onlineEXTRAS for this issue.

#1 Let the wood do the work

A blank with beautiful grain is the easiest way to elevate a cutting board to studio status. I tend to stick with hard, close-pored woods that are known to be food-safe such as maple, walnut, cherry, birch, and sycamore. It's best to stay away from tropical woods that contain toxins or allergens. (Since finding olive boards at boutique kitchen stores, I've added it to my acceptable list.)

Let the wood grain dictate the shape of the board. I use chalk to sketch out the board's outline. If the shape doesn't work, wipe away the lines with a damp rag and try again. I sand ordinary boards up to 400 grit, but with figured boards, I'll take it up to 600 grit.



#2 Get the right tools

You'll put your tablesaw, bandsaw, and thickness planer to work, but to keep the production line humming, be sure have these items close at hand. (See the Buyer's Guide on p. 66.) Bits and blades should be razor sharp. Freud's Quadra-cut router bits and Fisch's forstners cost more, but require less cleanup than other bits. Plan on putting your drill to work. For smoothing curves and polishing ornery end grain, nothing

beats a sanding mop. A polishing wheel (found at auto parts stores) saves time by eliminating plenty of hand rubbing.

Your choice of finish depends on how close you are to the finish line. With a few days' grace, I prefer the look and sheen of a drying oil, or oil/varnish. Flaxseed and walnut oil dry, but a little more slowly. If finishing a project the morning of the dinner party, wipe on mineral oil and top it with wax.



#3 Don't settle for simple strips

There's no reason why your creations should resemble the strip cutting boards sold at your local kitchen store. As these examples show, the same rip-and-glue approach can be used with more creative results. Combine four small strips of store-bought exotics with a live-edge piece of walnut. To play the angles, pull out your tapering jig.

It can also be fun to try a circular approach. After gluing together four squares of contrasting strips around a single axis point, I used a trammel-guided router to cut out a round board.

For a completely different look, make a board featuring curved strips and contrasting woods. For this effect, I held two boards together with double-stick tape, drew some lines, and stack-cut the contrasting blanks on my bandaw with a $\frac{3}{8}$ " blade. Separate the stacked pieces and rearrange them to show alternating species in your finished boards. TIP: If a joint isn't perfect, try sandwiching a flexible narrow strip of wood between the two.



Double-stick tape





#4 Power through production runs with patterns

Patterns and templates can help you crank out a stack of cutting boards in no time. Whether you make your own or buy them (Woodcraft has a good selection; see the Buyer's Guide, p. 66), here's how to make patterns work for you: First, use your pattern as a tracing template. Place it over your cutting board blank, and mark a cut line about $\frac{1}{16}$ " beyond the pattern edge. TIP: A pattern made from clear acrylic or polycarbonate allows you to see the grain, which can be helpful with a figured wood blank. Once you've cut out the rough shape of your board, adhere the pattern to the blank with double-stick tape, then rout the finished shape with a bearing-guided bit, as shown above.



#5 Give 'em a lift

How about handles and feet for your cutting boards? These hold-ups add visual interest as well as functionality. Handles simplify storage, while feet raise wood away from moisture, and can help keep a board from sliding off a countertop. The photos at right show a few of my favorite handle treatments. Drilled or pattern-routed holes are two options to consider. Or you can add a pair of drawer pulls to create a serving tray. Leather offers additional design opportunities. To avoid rust stains, use brass, stainless steel or aluminum fasteners to attach leather to the wood.

For feet, wooden pulls or wheels can be attached with dowels. Clip-on silicone pucks will prevent a board from sliding around on the counter. They can also prevent cross contamination by color-coding surfaces used for cutting vegetables or meat.

